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ABSTRACT

The media have had an enormous impact on consumption and use of various foods and health and fitness products. More money is spent for out-of-home and frozen ready-made meals than ever before. The use of the words "light" (or "lite") and "lean" by advertisers is questionned. The advertisers' view that women should increase their intake of iron and calcium by popping a pill a day is addressed. The importance of getting facts, instead of accepting advertising claims, is stressed. (MT)

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YOU ARE WHAT ADVERTISERS WANT YOU TO EAT

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YOU ARE WHAT ADVERTISERS WANT YOU TO EAT

There is an old saying, "You are what you eat." Consider, instead, the possibility that "you are what advertisers want you to eat." In the past 25 years in the United States, we have increased our caloric consumption approximately 8% with a 12% increase in dietary fats. At the same time, the average weight of women 25-55 has increased 5-8 lbs. What does, if anything, the advertising media have to do with this? We all enjoy well-made, intriguing, humorous commercial and print ads, but the media has had an enormous impact on our consumption and use of various foods, and health and fitness products.

We are exhorted by:

Cybil to take a new look at beef;

Bruce to enjoy a special wine cooler;

A myriad group of ex-jocks (none of which are women) who extoll the virtues of "Lite";

Chrissie tells that ice tea is refreshing;

We are told that the incredible, edible egg is misunderstood;

We sing all the way to the golden arches in our kind of town for a quickie breakfast;

And when we do eat at home, the microwave makes a frozen gourmet dinner possible in six minutes flat.

Needless to say, many of these are very good and they are definitely effective. All you have to do is look in the advertising journals about the increasing budget that food companies are using for advertising. The increased sales of their products is the proof of the pudding. I even heard it through the grapevine that the raisin has never known such success. The California Raisins commercial was proclaimed commercial of the year and sales of raisins are higher than they have ever been.

More of our meals are eaten out than ever before and part of the increase in meals outside the home reflects the fact that over half of all women participate in full-time jobs. We are spending more of our dollars for out-of-home meals or frozen ready-made meals than ever before -- much to the delight of restaurants, fast-food chains, frozen-food producers and their advertisers.

The first major concept that advertisers would have you believe which I would like to mention is that of "lite". If it contains the word "light" or "lite" then we think that this product differs from the regular in calories and probably some of the things that are not so good for us such

as fat and sodium. Fast-food chains are now offering lite menus and even telling us that what they normally serve is good, nutritious food. Bonnie Liebman, Director of Nutrition for the Center for Science in the Public Interest investigated 39 popular fast-food items for calorie count and amount of fat and sodium, which has important health implications. Ms. Liebman (quoted in Women's Sport and Fitness) concluded, "For every new truly light entree introduced, two other fatty-fried or salt-laden companions seem to appear." Some of the worst items on her list are croissant sandwiches and breakfast biscuits, some of which have over 500 calories and are 2/3 fat.

A recent segment on ABC's The Health Show looked at frozen entrees named "light" or "lean". If you are concerned about fat or sodium content (which are important factors for women in breast cancer and high blood pressure) then you better start reading labels. While many are indeed low in fat and sodium, others are higher than found in some of the "normal" foods. And, by the way, if you enjoy your light beer after a hard workout, you better look out. Some of the "lite" brands have more calories than other non-lite brands. So, while it's nice to see some of our favorite food products presented in an entertaining way, just make sure the break

you deserve today is the real thing in terms of nutrition for your body.

A second nutritional aspect of particular concern for women that Nancy Lopez and her husband want us to know about is "iron-poor blood". Many women are chronically tired. One cause of this fatigue is anemia -- a reduced amount of red blood cells which is responsible for carrying oxygen to the tissues. Diet, in which there is a deficiency of iron, may be one cause of anemia. Geritol and other producers of iron supplements would have you believe that every woman needs their product. according to the National Research Council, women, indeed, do not take in adequate amounts of iron. This is often crucial for the woman who is active and in endurance training.

Iron from the body is lost from menstruation, heavy sweating, intravascular hemolysis (which occurs in the feet with the constant pounding in running), and very intense training. The more active the woman, the greater the need to be aware of iron intake, Vitamin C, the B vitamins and folic acid. These vitamins, in particular, are not stored by the body and need to be replenished daily.

The active woman of menstruating age needs to be particularly careful to take in 18 mg/daily of iron. In a diet of well-selected foods, this may account for as many as

3,000 calories, which may not be a reasonable caloric inatake for those in search of the perfect body. The more active we are, the more calories we can consume without weight gain. Women past menopause only need aproximately 10 mg of iron daily.

The actual amount of iron that our bodies need each day is only 1.8 mg. So why is the RDA 18 mg? The reason is that only about 10% of dietary iron is absorbed. Iron found in meats is well-absorbed but only accounts for 10-15% of the total iron intake. Iron from plant sources is not as well absorbed -- only about 2-10% of that total.

There are certain ways to increase iron absorption:

Include a vitamin C food with every meal.

Include a small amount of lean meat, chicken or fish with each meal.

Avoid drinking tea or coffee with meals.

Avoid foods that contain the additive EDTA (found in salad dressings, margarine, processed fruits, veggies).

Increase consumption of iron-rich foods - liver, oysters, turkey, prunes, beef, kidney beans, raisins, and spinach, just to mention a few.

Another favorite word of advertisers is "fortified". Many of our favorite cereals are fortified with iron. The

truth is that the iron in supplements and fortified foods is not well-absorbed. Taken on an empty stomach, large dosages of iron can cause nausea and other digestive inconveniences.

Many active women suffer from sports anemia, which has been loosely defined as any hemoglobin concentration below that which is optimal for oxygen delivery (< 15-16 gm/100 ml may be too low for endurance athletes). The most common supplementation is 18 mg daily (RDA). Supplements should begin in small doses and increase gradually. Results may be evident in 1-3 weeks.

So, while the fact is that most women probably do not get enough iron in their diets, the fallacy is that we can pop a pill a day and not worry. If you are chronically tired, maybe it's time to let your physician check your hematocrit and hemoglobin levels and take a good hard look at the quality of your diet.

Another nutritional concern for women that has been brought to the forefront by the media is the image of our future -- the frail, humped-over gray-haired, little old lady -- all due to lack of calcium supplements. The number and different kinds of calcium supplements and their sales have boomed. The importance of calcium for today's woman is reflected in the fact that more products are advertising the fact that they contain calcium. A Tums a day may soon be

better than the proverbial apple a day. I even read recently that calcium will be added to Tab, a soft drink that focuses on women as its target audience.

Osteoporosis -- a degenerative bone disease characterized by the loss of calcium from the bones over a prolonged period of time -- is indeed a health concern of women as we age. Symptoms include back pain, loss of height, and very brittle bones that may break with little pressure. The images the advertisers produce are quite vivid.

The facts are that hormonal changes that occur with menopause accelerate calcium loss. Women who enter middle age with strong bones are less likely to suffer from osteoporosis later in life. The RDA for women is 800 mg. However, recent research reported in Women and Nutrition indicates premenopausal women need 1000 mg and postmenopausal women needs 1200-1700 mg. Adequate calcium can be consumed in the diet but it is important to watch the fat content of dairy products. It is preferrable to use nonfat or low-fat products. For women with milk intolerance, yogurt is lower in lactose and a supplement may be neccessary.

Looking at calcium supplements, as presented in Women and Nutrition, they are not created equal:

Calcium Content of Supplements

Supplement	Percent Calcium	Example Dose (mg)	Amount of Calcium (mg)
Calcium Carbonate	40%	1200 mg	480 mg
Calcium phosphate	32%	1200 mg	384 mg
Calcium lactate	18%	1200 mg	216 mg
Calcium gluconate	9%	1200 mg	108 mg

If you're taking supplements, don't assume that because you're taking a 1200 mg capsule or pill that you are getting 1200 mg of calcium. Vitamin D is essential for the adequate absorption of calcium. Women that don't see much sunlight or live in smoggy areas don't produce as much vitamin D as those who do. Other factors that affect calcium absorption are excessive protein intake (which promotes urinary excretion), alcohol consumption, excess fiber (but haven't we heard that fiber cereals are so good?) such as bran which are high in compounds called phytates (found in whole wheat and bind to some minerals in the intestine and reduce absorption), and stress. Coffee, cigarette smoking, and stress also promote loss of calcium from the bone.

Bone density and strength is actually promoted by weight bearing activity, such as walking, running, aerobic dancing, rope jumping, and tennis. Exercise has been shown to stimulate the growth of new bone, even in elderly women who

follow a program of mild exercise. On the other hand, excessive exercise can have a negative effect on bone mass. Research by Lutter as reported in Physician and Sportsmedicine indicates that "premenopausal women who work out excessively and who subsequently cease menstruating have a bone mass 22-30% below menstruating women."

One study reported that women given calcium supplements alone had little effect on prevention of bone loss in women 45 to 54. It seems that declining levels of estrogen are the chief cause of bone loss after menopause. Calcium in combination with estrogen therapy, at this point, seems to work best. Even as this presentation was being prepared, there was a news segment about how all these calcium supplements may contain too many trace elements of lead and zinc which may be harmful over the long haul. Now I ask you, what are bright, intelligent women like us suppose to believe? We find new evidence every month. Today's facts are tomorrow's fantasies. If calcium does have an impact on the prevention of osteoporosis, it seems more effective when there has been adequate calcium intake in the early years (childhood and young adulthood) and calcium combined with estrogen in later years, which only should be prescribed by your physician. If you are not getting adequate calcium in your diet, make sure of the amount of calcium you are

receiving from supplements. Thus, the fact (for now) is that calcium supplements alone won't prevent bone loss. But, hold one, I'm sure we'll have a new commercial tomorrow to enlighten us on that matter. This one is still an open book.

So, the next time you see Victoria, Cybil, Bruce, or Linda, let them entertain you. When a commercial appeals to your intellect, examine the claims. The advertising research says we are influenced by what we see and hear. Some of it is good -- some of it needs further analysis. Since it can be said we are what we eat, let's make sure we get the real facts and not just be what advertisers want us to eat.

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